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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 001628

SIPDIS

BAGHDAD FOR HOSTAGE WORKING GROUP

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SUBJECT: ALGERIAN TERRORISM EXPERT COMMENTS ON MURDER OF
DIPLOMATS, DEFEAT OF ALGERIAN TERRORISM

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Erdman, Reason 1.4 (d)

1. (C) Summary. Algerian journalist and terrorism expert Mounir Boudjemaa told DCM August 6 that the GOA had deliberately avoided mobilizing popular support for the release of the two diplomats kidnapped in Baghdad July 21 because the government expected them to be killed. Boudjemaa was uncertain how the GOA confirmed their deaths, but thought it had been based on analysis of extremist websites, rather than any specific information such as video tapes. Boudjemaa said he thought average Algerians were focused on domestic issues and not very concerned by Iraq, but the killings of the diplomats increased their awareness of the links between Algerian terrorists and Zargawi's Al-Qaida in Iraq. Turning to the state of Algeria's terrorist organizations, he said their capabilities were greatly reduced, especially in the cities. GSPC in particular continued to operate in some mountainous areas, but they now "lived like wolves" and had poor morale. GSPC had links with Maghrebi terrorist networks in Europe, but Boudjemaa was skeptical of the GSPC's ability to support direct ties to Zargawi, especially after the killing of the diplomats. If Bouteflika's National Reconciliation plan is implemented, Boudjemaa predicted, it would effectively put an end to the remaining Algerian terrorist groups. That said, some former terrorists have now turned to banditry, and Algeria faced a growing problem of violent street crime. End summary.

GOA Response to Kidnapping of Diplomats

2. (C) Mounir Boudjemaa is a journalist for the respected Algerian French-language daily Le Quotidien d'Oran, who writes on terrorism and national security issues. Boudjemaa is one of the few journalists who has contacts with both the security services and Algerian terrorist groups. In an August 6 conversation with DCM, Boudjemaa said his GOA contacts had told him that the Algerian government deliberately refrained from trying to mobilize public opinion and Islamic leaders to demand the release of the two Algerian diplomats kidnapped in Baghdad July 21 and reportedly killed July 27. Algerian security services, he commented, had been convinced from the beginning that Zargawi would kill the two captives shortly after taking them hostage, and therefore the GOA decided to impose a virtual news blackout and avoid getting the public involved.

3. (C) DCM asked specifically if Boudjemaa had any information about the basis on which the Presidency had confirmed the two diplomats' deaths less than two hours after the release of an Al-Qaida in Iraq statement announcing they had been killed. Boudjemaa said his contacts had told him the confirmation was based solely on Algerian terrorism experts' monitoring of extremist websites and analysis of past practice by Zargawi's organization. He did not think the Algerians had received a videotape or eyewitness confirmation of their deaths.

Impact on Algerian Public

4. (C) Asked about the popular reaction, Boudjemaa commented that Algerians generally were exhausted by the terrorist violence they had experienced in their own country in the 1990s, and had little real emotional engagement with problems abroad. While the Algerian media covered Iraq extensively and often with a slant hostile to what is usually described here as the "American occupation," Boudjemaa said that before the kidnapping of the two diplomats, genuine interest in Iraq was limited to Islamist and leftist circles. He agreed, however, that the GOA's Iraq policy had been much more nuanced, that Algeria had supported Security Council resolutions that provided legitimacy to the transfer of sovereignty and to the role of MNF-I, even while these positions were never clearly explained to the public. Boudjemaa thought the intense attention in the press to the deaths of the two diplomats, and especially the statements by GSPC urging Zargawi to kill them, had driven home the connections between Algerian terrorism and terrorism in Iraq.

5. (C) Asked about former Islamic Salvation Front (FIS)

number two Ali Benhadj's remarks to Al-Jazeera in which Benhadj praised Zargawi, justified taking the diplomats "prisoner" on the grounds that they were supporting the "occupation," and said it was up to Zargawi to decide what to do with them (statements for which Benhadj is under indictment), Boudjemaa said it only proved that Benhadj is "not a politician" and "lives in the Middle Ages." Boudjemaa thought it was equally revealing that former FIS leader Abassi Madani, who lives in Qatar, had issued an appeal for the release of a French woman journalist kidnapped in Iraq several months ago, but had said nothing about the Algerian diplomats until after they were dead. Boudjemaa thought the former FIS leaders' off-key response to this incident would likely further undermine their reputations with ordinary Algerians and confirm the view that they are dangerously out of touch with reality.

Algerian Terrorists "Live Like Wolves"

16. (C) Turning to the security situation in Algeria, Boudjemaa stated that even the largest Algerian terrorist organization, the GSPC, now had minimal capabilities in any of the urban areas. While terrorist ambushes of military patrols and military counterstrikes continue almost on a daily basis in several mountainous areas, Boudjemaa said he did not think GSPC could mount a serious attack in Algiers. In contrast to the mid-1990s, when GIA and GSPC "emirs" truly lived like princes in their mountain hideouts, today they "live like wolves," stealing sheep and wearing rags.

17. (C) Asked to project Algeria's security profile five years out, Boudjemaa said that if Bouteflika succeeded in introducing a National Reconciliation policy, including some kind of amnesty, it would take away the terrorists' last card and they would fade away within a few years. Violence-hardened ex-terrorists, stripped of their Islamic veneer but skilled at using weapons and without remorse, however, were already feeding a growing problem of banditry, and this kind of violent criminality would likely grow. Boudjemaa added that Algeria also faced a growing problem of violent juvenile delinquency. Middle class urban Algerians no longer feared being killed by terrorist gangs when they went out at night, but that fear was starting to be replaced by a fear of being mugged by knife-wielding young thugs.

Algerian Terrorist Networks

18. (C) Boudjemaa concluded the discussion by observing that Algerians, as well as Moroccans and Tunisians, were active in European terrorist networks, with the Algerians particularly active in France and the Moroccans in Spain. While he was aware there were efforts to organize groups of young Algerians to join Zargawi's terrorist cells in Iraq, Boudjemaa commented that he doubted these efforts would amount to much because Algerians were not very familiar with how to conduct themselves in Syria or Iraq and were not comfortable operating in the eastern Arab environment. Similarly, Boudjemaa said Algerian terrorists had established a network in Canada but he thought they had failed to do so in the U.S. for similar reasons. DCM agreed this made sense, citing an MNF-I report that showed that Algerians only constituted about one percent of captured non-Iraqi terrorists held by U.S. forces in Iraq.

19. MINIMIZE CONSIDERED

ERDMAN